

## Decision Memo

### Early Successional Habitat (ESH) Treatments

*USDA Forest Service - Chattooga River Ranger District – Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests - Rabun County, Georgia.*

#### **DECISION and PURPOSE and NEED**

I have decided to cut down (and leave) selected woody vegetation (including broken and suppressed trees, rhododendron, and mountain laurel) and complete prescribed burning within the Coleman River (Flat Branch) and Lake Burton ESH project areas. A total of approximately 130 acres of the cut and leave treatment, and 220 acres (for the two treatment areas) of prescribed burning are planned.

Recent site visits have indicated that these treatments are necessary following the previously approved (Decision Notice, 3/8/05) commercial removal of trees completed in the past two years. The primary goals of these treatments include: to maintain the existing early successional habitat; promote a sparse amount of natural regeneration of native, disturbance dependant tree species, including oaks, hickories, shortleaf and pitch pine; reduce the amount of undesirable white pine regeneration that may occur; and to establish a well developed grass and forb layer within the forest understory. Eventually, these treatments would move the project area towards a very open oak-pine woodland habitat, which includes an open tree canopy, a sparse midstory canopy and a well developed understory layer that includes a variety of shrubs, grasses, forbs and naturally regenerating tree species.

The cut and leave treatments will reduce the current density of woody vegetation by cutting down selected residual stems, including trees that are broken, damaged, suppressed, have poor form or other qualities, or that are non-native or provide minimal wildlife benefits. Woody shrub species (mountain laurel and rhododendron) will also be cut in order to provide an adequate amount of sunlight to reach the forest floor to promote the natural regeneration of more desired species such as white, red and chestnut oaks, and hickories.

After the cut/leave treatments have been completed, prescribed burning will be used on an average three to five year rotation to continually promote the natural regeneration of native, disturbance dependant tree species such as shortleaf pines, oak and hickories, as well as a variety of native grasses and forbs. Growing season prescribed fire, which is typically prescribed during the months of April through September, is included as part of this proposal because it is an effective prescribed burning technique used to kill back unwanted woody shrubs and small trees, while also increasing the abundance and diversity of herbaceous plants and the native wildlife populations that depend on a well developed herbaceous understory.

These treatments will contribute to providing a diversity of habitat, especially high-quality high elevation early successional forest communities (Forest Plan, Goal 2 and Objective 3.8) and also contribute to the viability of native wildlife species like the golden-winged warbler and the ruffed grouse (Forest Plan, Goal 1). All applicable mitigation will be carried out as detailed in the Forest Plan and the Best Management Practices for Georgia. Some selected important mitigation measures for the ESH treatments include the following:

- ❖ The treatments will be completed over the next six to eight years and one of the burns will be conducted during the growing season. This would improve the effectiveness of minimizing the re-establishment of white pine in to the project area.
- ❖ Water control structures necessary for the control of surface water movement resulting from bladed control lines for the prescribed burns would be constructed within 30 days of completion of the activity (Standard FW-066, FW-205).
- ❖ Revegetation of bare soil created by construction of control lines would be completed to a minimum of 85% coverage within the first growing season following the completion of project activity (FW-068, FW-197).
- ❖ The burns would be conducted with full adherence to Forest Service internal guidance for air quality and the pollution control methodologies prescribed by air quality regulatory agencies.
- ❖ No active lighting would occur in the riparian areas. Fire would be allowed to back in to these areas and go out, resulting in little to no burning adjacent to streams.
- ❖ The reserve trees (from the ESH project) will continue to be protected and will serve as major components in the final basal area for the project.
- ❖ High and intermediate canopy stream shade would be maintained within the riparian corridor (Standard FW-201) during these treatments. This corridor is defined on page 3-175 of the Forest Plan. Within this corridor, only hand lines would be constructed (Standards 11-033 and 11-032).

The project area is within Management Prescriptions (MP) 8.A.2 and (MP) 11. Although both management prescriptions focus on letting natural disturbances or process dictate vegetation succession, each management prescription does make provisions for allowing wildlife-related early successional habitat management, where appropriate, as well as allowing other vegetation management activities which would enhance the diversity and complexity of native vegetation. The treatments discussed in this document have been found to be consistent with both of the above mentioned management prescriptions.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Beginning in June of 2006, a project identified as “Early Successional Habitat (ESH) Treatments” was listed for the Tallulah Ranger District in the Schedule of Proposed Actions for the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. The Schedule was made available to the public via the Forest Service website.

Scoping letters were sent out on June 20, 2006 to the Tallulah Ranger District’s persons, agencies and organizations known to be interested in projects of this type. One response was received:

*Georgia Forest Watch (GFW) expressed their concerns (Sarah Francisco, Staff Attorney dated 7/17/2006 and 8/23/2006), “the proposed cut and leave treatment, when combined with the “Early Successional Habitat” timber sale (DN 3/08/05) in the same area, apparently will strip*

*virtually all vegetation from Flat Branch (Coleman River) Project area. This may be inconsistent with agreement resolving Georgia Forest Watch's administrative appeal of the "Early Successional Habitat Project. We are concerned that the timber sale combined with cut, leave and burn could result in a virtual clearcut. Also, concerns were expressed that a cut and leave operation would impact the cool water naturally reproducing trout streams (Flat Branch and its tributaries) within the project area by removing cover and raising water temps."*

Additional information has been provided to GFW to better illustrate the details of the proposed Cut and Leave Operation. A field trip with GFW provided a more detailed explanation of what the operation would consist of and the benefits it would provide to the area (i.e. significantly increased growth from suppressed herbs and forbs, more palatable vegetation, naturally occurring grass species, and an increase in insect and larvae life).

### **REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION**

Timber stand improvements are actions that were determined by the Chief of the Forest Service to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), unless extraordinary circumstances exist. A Decision Memo and Project File are required for this action, which is identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 "Environmental Policy and Procedures", Chapter 30, Section 31.2, Category # 6, as follows:

"Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction."

I have also determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that may cause the project to have significant effects. Specifically:

- ❑ Ground disturbing activities will not take place on steep slopes. Appropriate mitigation measures will be applied such as prompt revegetation of exposed soils and installation of erosion control structures. Similar past projects in this area were determined to have no significant soil-related impacts.
- ❑ This project will not affect any federally Proposed, Endangered or Threatened species or their critical habitat (see Biological Evaluation in the project file.) This project is not likely to cause a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest.
- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project.
- ❑ This area is not within a current inventoried roadless area.
- ❑ The project is not within a research natural area.

- ❑ This project will not impact historic or prehistoric resources. No known historic or prehistoric sites that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (see project file).
- ❑ The cumulative effects of this project combined with others in the foreseeable future will not be significant.
- ❑ This project will not involve the use of herbicides and will not involve the construction of any temporary use or low standard roads.
- ❑ The stands will not be converted to another type of species, but will allow for a progression toward a more diverse forest community.

### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

This project is consistent with the 2004 Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with Forest Plan standards for timber stand improvement and prescribed burning, and meet desired conditions, goals, objectives, and standards established for the Forest and Management Prescription (MP) 8.A.2 and 11. The vegetation management practices including sanitation thinnings and prescribed burning are “recommended” for a yellow pine-oak stand (Forest Plan, Appendices, page F-50 to F-51); Riparian corridors will be managed to retain, restore and/or enhance the inherent ecological processes or functions of the associated aquatic, riparian and upland components within the corridor (Forest Plan, page 3-171) considering the purpose and need for this project.

State-approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act.

This project follows the Forest-wide, MP 8.A.2, and MP 11 direction as mentioned above. Specifically:

- ❑ The project actions are consistent with the desired conditions for MP 8.A.2, MP 11, and will help meet a specific standard for these MPs.
- ❑ The actions in this project were chosen after considering economic and environmental aspects of various renewable resources and protection of forest resources to provide for outdoor recreation, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish. These resource values are discussed throughout this DM.
- ❑ This project will contribute toward a much greater diversity of plant and animal communities across the landscape based on the suitability and capability of the land area in order to meet the overall multiple-use objectives.
- ❑ This project will not produce substantial and permanent impairment of site productivity and will ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

This decision is subject to appeal by those who provided substantive comments during the 30-day public review period. Written notice of appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 214.14, "Content of an Appeal," including the reasons for appeal. Appeals must be postmarked or received within 45 days following publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the Clayton Tribune in Clayton, Georgia. The appeal should be sent to: USDA Forest Service, Chattahoochee – Oconee National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, GA 30501.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

This decision will not be implemented until at least 5 business days after the closure of the appeal period, or 15 days after disposition of the last appeal, whichever comes later. It is expected this decision will be implemented starting sometime in late spring or early summer, 2009.

## **CONTACT PERSON**

For additional information concerning this decision, contact John D. Westbrook by phone at 706-754-6221, Ext. 150.

## **SIGNATURE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL**

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David W. Jensen  
District Ranger  
Chattooga River Ranger District

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Date